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ABSTRACT

This discussion of English participles is intended to aid teachers of English as a second language in both understanding and teaching their use. The forms, functions (as verbs and adjectives), and meanings of participles are first outlined, and an approach for presenting this information to students is detailed. It begins with establishing a convention of using the signal "-en" as the past participle form, to distinguish it from the past tense form "-ed". Once forms are clear to students, the meanings of the two signals "-ing and -en" are explained, emphasizing the semantic relationship between them and considering them as a related pair with contrasting meanings. To reinforce the understanding of present and past participles as an opposing pair, the degree of vividness interpretation can be applied to show the contrast between the two forms of participles. Forms, functions, and means are to be introduced and explained as a unit, since all linguistic signs involve signals paired with meanings used in certain contexts. Contains 6 references. (MSE)

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Form, Function, and Meaning: Understanding/Teaching English Participles

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English participles are defined as non-finite verb forms that function as adjectives. There are two kinds of participles in English: present participles and past participles. They are labeled as the *-ing* form for present participles and the *-en* form for past participles. Although the distinction between the present and past participles seems to be very straightforward to native speakers of English, it sometimes can be very problematic to students learning English as a Second Language (ESL). In ESL students' compositions, there is a recurring tendency to misuse English participles. We often come across such examples in our ESL students' writings as:

1. *I am very *interesting* in learning English grammar.
2. *My son is *boring* in his math class because the math problems are very easy.
3. *I have just seen an *excited* movie with my friends.
4. *The directions to the party are very *confused* to us.

To address this problem appropriately, we need to have a thorough understanding of English participles, their forms, functions, and meanings. The following discussion examines the various facets of English participles. By understanding the forms paired with meanings, we can develop a practical approach to teaching English participles so that our ESL students can understand the key concepts of participles and use them effectively in their oral and written communication.

Forms of English Participles

The participles are identical in form when they are used as verbs and adjectives. The present participle is used in the progressive tenses such as *He is working* or *was working* for verbs and *a depressing man* for adjectives. The past participle form is used to

form perfect tenses such as *have walked* and *had spoken* as well as adjectives such as *a depressed man* and *a bitten dog*. The present participle form is always *-ing*, while the past participle form varies depending on the inflection or the ending of the verb; for example, *walked* is a regular verb ending, and *spoken* is an irregular verb ending. In traditional grammar, the past participle is termed the *-ed* form because all the regular English verbs end with an *-ed* for both past tense and past participle forms. This designation is inaccurate because irregular verbs in English do not end with *-ed* in their past participle forms. In addition, ESL students may mistake the past participle form for the past tense form of the verbs. Therefore, the primary task in understanding the forms of English participles is to adopt a convention that will distinguish the past participle forms from the past tense forms even though all past tense forms of regular English verbs end with *-ed*. We can create a verb paradigm to establish such a distinction.

Table 1. The English Verb Forms

Verbs	Infinitive (to)	3rd Per. Sg. Present (-s)	Past Tense (-ed)	Past Participle (-en)	Present Participle (-ing)
talk	to talk	talks	talked	(have/has) talked	talking
make	to make	makes	made	(have/has) made	making
be	to be	is	was/were	(have/has) been	being
take	to take	takes	took	(have/has) taken	taking
cut	to cut	cuts	cut	(have/has) cut	cutting

The paradigm in Table 1 has covered all the possible verb forms in English. The *to-* form stands for the infinitive; the *-s* form, the third person singular present; the *-ed* form, past tense; the *-en* form, past participle; and the *-ing* form, present participle. From this table, we can clearly distinguish each particular verb form. For instance, *talk* is a regular verb with a maximum of four forms, and *take, be, make*, and *cut* are irregular verbs with a maximum of five forms for *take* and *be*, four for *make*, and a minimum of three for *cut*.

The distinction between the past tense form and the past participle form is thus made clear. Once we have established the convention of using *-en* form to indicate past participle, ESL students will not confuse the past tense form with the past participle form that easily. Understanding the past participle form is essential in using it effectively in tense formation as participle and as adjective in a noun phrase. We can now turn our discussion to the functions of participles.

Functions of English Participles

Huddleston (1993:318), in his *Introduction to the Grammar of English*, points out,

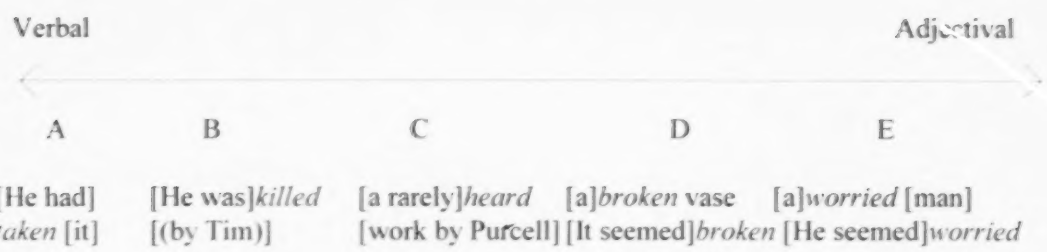
> Whereas gerunds are traditionally described as 'verbal nouns', participles are said to be 'verbal adjectives'. The term 'participle' is etymologically related to 'participate' and the idea behind it is that participles 'share' the properties of verbs and adjectives.

As the name of "verbal adjectives" suggests, the participles can function as both verbs and adjectives. Examine the following sentences:

5. He had *taken* it.
6. He was *killed* by Tim.
7. It is a rarely *heard* work by Purcell.
8. It is a *broken* vase. It seemed *broken*.
9. He is a *worried* man. He seemed *worried*.

Sentences 5 to 9 containing past participles can be placed on the continuum set up by Huddleston (1993:324) with "verbal" on the one end and "adjectival" on the other. We can see that the verbs and adjectives are spreading all across it. Figure 1 is Huddleston's representation of verbal and adjectival continuum.

Figure 1 Huddleston's Verbal and Adjectival Continuum



Along this verbal-adjectival continuum, the past participles used in these instances gradually shift from verbs to adjectives. In A and B, *taken* and *killed* are part of the verb phrases indicating past perfect tense (VP → T (= past) + PERF (= have + -en)) and past passive (VP → T (= past) + PASS (= be + -en)) respectively. *Broken* and *worried* in D and E are part of the noun phrases (NP → D + ADJ + N) as they occur in between determiners and nouns and function as predicatives grammatically in both cases. In C, however, *heard* shares the features of both a verb and an adjective. In the surface structure, *heard* is placed in between a determiner and a noun (NP→ D + ADJP + N + PP). But when we rewrite 7, we get 7a as follows:

7a. It is a work by Purcell that *is* rarely *heard*.

7a is the underlying structure of 7 and we know that *heard* is a verb, not an adjective in this case. This is further evidenced by the "very" and "seem" test. We may use this structural test frame by inserting "very" or "seem" or both in front of the participles. We cannot use "very" or "seem" before *taken*, *killed*, or *heard* in A, B, and C, but if we put *broken* and *worried* in D and E to test, they will pass the test easily. Therefore, we can conclude that participles in A, B, and C are verbs, and participles in D and E are adjectives.

Huddleston's verbal and adjectival continuum as represented in Figure 1 is also valid

for present participles. Let us examine some examples of present participles:

10. He was *telling* the truth.
11. No one saw him *leaving* the building.
12. *Being* a single parent, she has to do all the house chores on her own.
13. Those *making* more than $50,000 a year will pay tax at a different bracket.
14. The beating incident *being* debated was somewhat controversial.
15. The boy pointed towards the *moving* van.
16. Residents are concerned about the rapidly *growing* crime rate in the area.
17. He was a *charming* politician.
18. It seemed very *interesting*.

The present participle in 10 is part of the verb indicating the past progressive tense (VP → T (= past) + PROG (= be + -ing)) while the participles in sentences 11 to 14 can be recast to show their deep structures. Examine the recast sentences:

11a. No one saw him (when he *was*) *leaving* the building.
12a. (As she *is*) *being* a single parent, she has to do all the house chores on her own.
13a. Those (who *are*) *making* over $50,000 a year will pay tax at a different bracket.
14a. The beating incident (which *is*) *being* debated was somewhat controversial.

Words in the parentheses are added to show the function of present participles in each particular sentence. It is quite obvious that they ought to be accounted for as verbs. Sentences 15 and 16, however, appear to have a different structure from sentences 11 to 14 because present participles in these sentences are involved in noun phrases. But when we examine these sentences closely, we find that they share the same feature of being part of a verb. For instance:

15a. The boy pointed toward the *moving* van (= the van that *is moving*).
16a. Residents are concerned about the rapidly *growing* crime rate (= the crime rate that *is growing* rapidly) in the area.

As we have indicated earlier, 15 and 16 can be placed somewhere in the middle of the verbal and adjectival continuum. That is to say they appear to be adjectives in the surface structures, but they are actually verbs in their deep structures. In contrast, 17 and 18 are at

the very end on the adjectival side of the continuum since they are more adjectival than verbal.

Meanings and Interpretations of English Participles

Having discussed the forms and functions of English participles, we now have a better understanding of the structural formation and grammatical function of this linguistic phenomenon. To fully understand English participles and teach them effectively, we also need to understand the semantics of the participles.

In our discussions, we have found that the inflectional morphemes attached to the verbs (*-ing* for present participles and *-en* for past participles) represent two opposing signals with two different meanings. These two signals should not be treated as isolated and unrelated morphemes. Similar to Reid's entity number system (-∅ vs. *-s* as in *a book*∅ vs. *two book*s) signaling "one" vs. "more than one," the coexistence of these two signals (*-ing* vs. *-en*) also "forms a system in the Saussurean sense of a set of relationally defined units" (Reid, 1991:46). The meaning of *-ing* for present participles is defined in terms of the meaning *-en* for past participles. When we use *-ing*, we express the meaning of an on-going event itself or as what Huffman termed it the "actual activity" (1989:152); when we use *-en*, we signal the meaning of a resultant state or "a state resulting from the activity." Table 2 illustrates this pair of morphemes with their attached meanings.

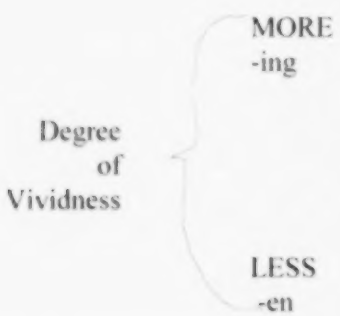
Table 2. Signals and Meanings of English Participles

Verbs	Signal: *-ing* Meaning: on-going event itself	Signal: *-en* Meaning: resultant state
marry	a *marrying* man	a *married* man
fall	a *falling* rock	a *fallen* rock
bite	a *biting* dog	a *bitten* dog
bore	a *boring* comedian	a *bored* audience
break	CNN *Breaking* News	a *broken* vase

The participles with the signal *-ing* denote the meaning of an on-going event itself. "Marrying," "falling," "biting," "boring," and "breaking" all indicate a process the head noun (i.e. man, rock, dog, or comedian) is currently going through or formulating (i.e. news). The meaning of present participles focuses on an on-going process or activity itself. The past participles with signals *-en*, on the other hand, denote quite a different meaning. They indicate a resultant state after an event or activity, not an on-going process. A bachelor becomes "a *married* man" after the wedding ceremony. "A *fallen* rock" and "a *broken* vase" refer to the state of being after the event of "falling" and "breaking." "A *bitten* dog" and "a *bored* audience" have already experienced a certain event or activity.

On the interpretation side, the signal *-ing* used to be interpreted as indicating an "active" action in traditional grammar and *-en* a "passive" one. This interpretation seems to be less adequate as compared to Huffman's interpretation in terms of the degree of vividness (Huffman, 1989:152).

Figure 2. Interpretation of English Participles



As the signal *-ing* indicates the on-going event itself, for example, "CNN *breaking* news," it can be interpreted in a more vivid manner. The signal *-en*, in contrast, denotes that the

event has already happened as in "the *broken* vase"; it, therefore, has a less vivid interpretation. Students can form mental pictures by examining a given participle in its degree of vividness.

Teaching English Participles

The examination of the forms, functions, and meanings of English participles has given us guidance for teaching them to our ESL students. We may start by establishing a convention of using the signal *-en* as the past participle form to distinguish it from the past tense form *-ed*. Once we have made the forms clear to our students, we may proceed to explain the meanings of the two signals (*-ing* vs. *-en*). We need to emphasize the semantic relationship between them and consider them as a related pair with contrasting meanings. To reinforce the understanding of present and past participles as an opposing pair, we may apply the degree of vividness interpretation to show the contrast between the two forms of participles. The forms, functions, and meanings should be introduced and explained as a whole unit as all linguistic signs involve signals paired with meanings that are used in certain context.

The analysis of signals (*-ing* and *-en* morphemes) paired with meanings along with Huffman's interpretation of these signals (more vivid vs. less vivid) has provided a set of essential elements for our ESL students to understand English participles. These key features of English participles can be summarized (see Table 3) and utilized as references for teaching ESL students who have difficulty distinguishing the meaning of present participles from that of its counterpart, past participles.

Table 3 Key Features of English Participles with Examples

Signal: *-ing* Meaning: on-going event/activity Interpretation: more vivid	Signal: *-en* Meaning: resultant state Interpretation: less vivid
an *embarrassing* experience	an *embarrassed* stranger
an *exciting* trip	*excited* vacationers
a *depressing* experience	a *depressed* person
a *satisfying* meal	*satisfied* customers
an *encouraging* coach	an *encouraged* player
a *charming* politician	the *charmed* followers
a *fascinating* story	a *fascinated* group of friends
an *amusing* monkey	an *amused* audience
a *surprising* decision	the *surprised* parents
a *frustrating* test	a *frustrated* student
falling prices	a *fallen* hero
a *moving* scene	a deeply *moved* youngster
a *shrinking* number	a *shrunken* shirt

Conclusion

The discussion of the various facets of English participles has yielded certain strategies that may be useful in presenting them to our ESL students. Obviously, the study of form and function is not quite enough if we ignore the meaning because knowing the distinction of verbs and adjectives does not solve the problem of comprehending English participles and using them effectively in communication. By examining the signals (or the morphemes attached to the participles) paired with meanings, we have come to the core of understanding English participles. In addition, interpreting English participles in terms of degree of vividness has provided further distinction between present and past participles. ESL students are able to understand the different forms paired with meanings and make their own interpretations mentally whenever they use English participles in their communication.

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